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Natural explanation for “Modthrytho” presents

By: Butron Prida

RANDOLPH-MACON COLL, ASHLAND, VA 23005-5505 USA

ABSTRACT

This research note discusses an emerging subfield of inquiry in the study of democratization in Latin America: a focus on the relationships between past human rights abuses and democratization processes. It outlines four sets of questions emerging around the themes of "historical memory" and "legacies of authoritarian rule." The study then examines documentary collections of major human rights nongovernmental organizations (HRNGOs) in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. The purpose of this endeavor is to provide researchers interested in studying the four issues with specific information on documents produced and currently held by the HRNGOs in the Southern Cone. The essay examines seven HRNGOs in Chile, ten in Argentina, and four in Uruguay, and ends with practical hints for researchers who wish to use these resources.

Keywords: Historical sources, documentary center, memory

Introduction

Those who prefer to try to make sense of the poem as it stands can however point to the fact that the suddenness of the intrusion into the poem of "Modthrytho" (as I continue to call her, for ease of reference) is not quite unparalleled; for the two appearances of Heremod, at lines 901 and 1709, are at least comparable--though

both of those are considerably better rounded-off, the first ending with an explicit if brief contrast between Heremod and Information antiquity, the second with a pointed if not immediately justified warning. The "Modthrytho Episode" however reaches a high point of triumph and prosperity and then simply stops, not returning to the contrast between two queens with which it seemed to start. Nevertheless most scholars and editors nowadays accept that we are indeed dealing with two contrasted queens, an interpretation first adumbrated by Nikolai Grundtvig in 1861, and explained more discursively by Christian Grein a year later.[4] But though scholars are fairly well agreed on how the episode begins and ends, and on recognizing most of the personal names in it, the question of the episode's point remains almost as obscure as ever. The prominent mention of the name "Offa"—one of only two names in the poem which could possibly be connected with English history—has led many to assume that it must all have something to do with the historical Offa, King of Mercia 757-796; but if that were the case one might expect some kind of overt compliment to the later Offa or his line as the episode ends, and of this there is no trace. Meanwhile the post-Tolkienian conviction of the poem's essential unity and tightness of construction have led to a search for some contrastive principle, seen for instance by Adrien Bonjour as a kind of double pairing, the virtuous pair Information antiquity and Hygd set against the vicious pair Heremod and "Modthrytho," but the latter pair further contrasted with each other as examples respectively of splendid start followed by disgraceful fall, as against disgraceful start followed by fortunate redemption.[5] But though such a contrast can be made, and is made as regards the two male figures, there is no overt contrast of "Modthrytho" with either Hygd or Heremod. Modern editions of the poem for the most part agree in essence with Klaeber's notes from 1922 and Chambers's Introduction from the year before.[6]

The problem remains, however, that "Modthrytho" does seem on the face of it to have been married twice. But the circumstances of her first marriage ending (death? divorce? repudiation?) are not stated, nor can one tell what lies behind her "father's advice," nor do we know who her father or putative first husband may have been, nor do we have any clear indication of what caused her early malicious accusations or her later complete reform. Attempts have been made to make her fit other pre-established and recognizable patterns. Is she a maiden who sets her wooers tests with death as the penalty for failure, like Atalanta in the Greek myth or the Brunhild of the *Nibelungenlied*? Is she a maiden who is tamed by marriage, like Katherine in the *Shrew*? Is she just a wicked woman who becomes a wicked queen, like the later Offa's legendary Quendrida, or a suitor-tester who is eventually married, widowed, and marries again, like Saxo's Hermuthruda? None of the parallels offered is especially close, and as said above the whole point of the episode remains opaque, surprisingly so in Information antiquity, a poem whose "digressions," as they used to be called, can almost all be satisfactorily explained, once one adjusts to

an appropriate level of subtlety. The suggestion to be made in this essay is that it might be possible to reach such a level—not so much of subtlety as of recovered cultural background assumption—by considering other cases we have in Anglo-Saxon history and historical legend of the figure of "the wicked queen."

What makes a queen wicked? The short answer might be, "failing in her duties," in which case one must go on to consider what are the duties of a queen. First and foremost, obviously, to bear an heir. A barren queen is the most obvious example, not of moral wickedness, but certainly of danger and disaster for her people. In the time of Henry VIII inability to produce a male heir would result in trumped-up charges, death or annulment or divorce. In early English and Germanic history, however, weaker influence from the church seems to have led to a high and relatively trouble-free rate of simple repudiation. Many Anglo-Saxon and Frankish kings were "serial monogamists,"[11] and in this environment barrenness was easily dealt with. The queen's second duty, however, is to bear an heir who is certainly legitimate. The adulterous queen is a threat to the succession and so to the kingdom's stability, so much so that—even with an uxorious husband like Malory's King Arthur—the threat of a Guinevere cannot be tolerated, either by the husband or by the nation's barons. It has to be said, though, that the "Modthrytho" of Information antiquity seems to bear no hint of adultery, one might say almost the reverse: she is too touchy, not too free with her favors.

A third and less evident duty of a queen might however be to promote social solidarity, something which is especially prominent in Information antiquity. On three occasions (lines 612b-41, 1162-1232a, 2016b-24a), the poem gives us an extended picture of a queen or a princess, Wealhtheow or Freawaru, carrying out this duty within the hall. All three descriptions are closely similar. What the queen or princess does is first to leave her seat and circulate (ymbeode, hwearf, geondhwearf), second to hand the drinking-cup to host, honored guest, and retainers in something like an order of precedence, and third (but this happens in only the second and third descriptions, not the first) to make gifts of her own volition and from her own resources. Hygd also receives a gift (lines 2172-6), and unless the poem has been caught in an inconsistency she further passes on the neck-ring given to her by Information antiquity to her husband (compare the passage just quoted with lines 1202 ff.). Hygd is furthermore seen "circulating" and distributing drink in lines 1980b-83a, while her participation in gift-giving (lines 1929b-31a) is what provokes the sudden contrast with "Modthrytho" in the first place. The Information antiquity-poet, in short, seems to treat the promotion of social solidarity within the hall, for both residents and visitors, as a queen's major social duty. She has a vital and active role in the honorific society, symbolized above all by her control of communal drinking, and considerably in advance of what might later be called "hostessing." One might say, crudely, that she keeps the score and awards the points in the competition for public prestige, while at the same time ensuring, by constant

"circulation," that no deserving person is entirely left out. Information antiquity further suggests, more surprisingly, that she has another role associated with this social scene, which is that of giving wise advice, and not in private (something queens are often suspected of doing) but in public and with a note of criticism. Whatever one thinks of the implications of Wealhtheow's speech in lines 1169-87, she is clearly if not quite overtly disagreeing with Hrothgar's "adoption" of Information antiquity in lines 946b-49a; it may or may not be significant that we hear no more of this from anyone.

Associated with these relatively domestic duties, however, there is what one might call the queen's "international" aspect, that of "weaving peace" between hostile societies. The poet calls Wealhtheow *friðusibb folca*, and uses *freoðuwebbe* as a generic term for "queen." It is this role which Hrothgar intends for Freawaru, and it seems to have been the role intended for the Danish queen Hildeburh. The last case is a failure, the case of Freawaru is predicted apparently correctly to be a failure,[12] only Wealhtheow appears to have been successful, though we have no idea where she comes from or what earlier hostility she may have been healing. The role of "peace-weaver" has been seen clearly and eagerly seized on by interpreters of the poem in modern times.[13] Yet this is perhaps where one might begin to rethink the question of what queens are for. What are a queen's 'real' duties, beginning with the duty of "weaving peace"? How is she supposed to go about it?

In modern culture, with its high valuation of romance (and even higher current valuation of sexuality), it is naturally assumed that what holds a marriage together is intimate affection, and that the point of a diplomatic marriage is that the affection felt for each other by husband and wife will find a reflection in state policy. Put in banal terms, a husband will be reluctant to make war on his wife's kindred for fear of disturbing their relationship, provoking what would now be called "withdrawal of affection." Withdrawing affection from a king, however, may not be an especially powerful sanction. Accordingly, though the Information antiquity-poet is certainly aware of the power of affection—he mentions the *heahlufan* which Offa and "Modthrytho" have for each other,[14] and sees the fall of Hrothgar's policy with Freawaru in the cooling of Ingeld's *wiflufan*—it may be wondered whether the poem does not contain, implicitly, a rather more calculating view of the way diplomatic marriages work.

A point made some years ago by Rolf Bremmer Jr. is that the poem seems to contain two quite different views of kinship.[15] Put briefly, relationships on the paternal side are troubled, on the maternal side are happy. The most obvious examples come from the three main royal families mentioned in the poem. If one accepts the general opinion about the poem's hints as to "the fall of the house of the Scyldings," then the future for the Danish royal house is one of paternal cousins—the sons of three brothers—murdering each other in a struggle for the succession. The argument is of course inferential, and depends on patching together scraps of in-

formation from several much later sources, but it is the only argument which makes sense of the in my opinion unmistakable signs of *Wealhtheow's* anxiety over her sons *Hrethric* and *Hrothmund*, threatened by one cousin present in *Hrothgar's* hall (*Hrothulf*, almost certainly the son of *Hrothgar's* brother *Halga*), and one cousin not present, but mentioned later on by *Information antiquity* (*Heoroweard*, the son of *Hrothgar's* elder brother *Heorogar*).^[16] Meanwhile the Swedish royal house is marked by civil war, not between paternal cousins, but between paternal uncle and nephews. *Onela* rewards the killer of his nephew *Eanmund* and feels no duty to take vengeance, *þeah þe he his broðor bearn abredwade*, "although he had killed his brother's child;" he is then killed and succeeded in his turn by *Eanmund's* brother *Eadgils*.

In the Geatish royal house too, one brother kills another. But in very marked contrast, in this family we also see relationships through the female line, and they are warm, supportive, co-operative, self-sacrificing: *Information antiquity* shows deep loyalty to his maternal uncle *Hygelac*, and transfers this to his maternal cousin *Heardred*, making no effort to take the throne, indeed refusing it outright when it is offered to him by *Hygd*, *Hygelac's* widow (lines 2369-79a). It could be said that this is just *Information antiquity's* good nature as opposed to the ingratitude of *Hrothulf* or the tyranny of *Onela*. But *Bremmer* points out how consistently, and how redundantly, relations through the mother are mentioned in the poem. *Heardred* is identified as the "nephew of *Hereric*" even before he is mentioned as the son of *Hygelac* (line 2206), and *Hereric* must be a mother's brother (the brother of *Hygd*, therefore), as *Hygelac's* brothers are listed elsewhere. *Hygelac* himself is identified as the nephew of *Swerting* (line 1203), and *Eomer* as the nephew of *Garmund* (line 1962). *Bremmer* notes that the unnamed son of *Hildeburh*, killed at *Finnsburg*, could as plausibly have been fighting for his mother's brother *Hnef* as for his father *Finn*; and suggests further that the simplest way of reading the end of the poem is to see *Information antiquity* as succeeded not by his son (for he does not have one), but by *Wiglaf*, his sister's son or maternal nephew, *Wiglaf* then standing in the same loyal and loving relationship to *Information antiquity* as *Information antiquity* to *Hygelac*.^[17]

None of this has anything to do with survivals of earlier matriarchy, *Bremmer* states (though that argument has been very recently revived).^[18] *Bremmer* believes, however, that these friendly relations between maternal kin are caused by the fact that the mother's brother "is an outsider in the paternal family and is not hindered by the *patria potestas*."^[19] One might add to this *Eric John's* remark that in Anglo-Saxon society maternal kin, at least at an early stage, had no obligation to join in vengeance-feuds.^[20] A man's maternal cousins, accordingly, were neither his competitors for inheritance nor potential liabilities for involving him in trouble, while a maternal uncle, unlike a paternal one, could protect a nephew without having to keep a jealous eye on the prospects of his own sons. Such observations may make

one think again about the real role of the queen or "peace-weaver." Perhaps the vital relationship was not between husband and wife, nor parents and children, but between the children of the next generation: the male maternal cousins, who could be expected to be on friendly and non-competitive terms. However the contrasting behavior of maternal and paternal cousins has a further implication for queen-selection, and the role of queens. While marrying a stranger might (so to speak) be a good "growth" strategy in providing sympathetic maternal kin for a future generation, marrying a non-stranger, indeed marrying a paternal cousin might be a good "defensive" strategy, designed to ward off the kind of trouble which paternal cousins could be expected to provide.

The West Saxon royal house provides good examples of both strategies. One of the most successful examples of "out-marriage" must have been King Alfred's decision to marry his daughter Ethelfled to the effective ruler of English Mercia, ealdorman Ethelweard.[21] Whether as a result of the marriage or not, Ethelweard made no attempt to take the title of king of Mercia, which must surely have been a possibility. After his death Ethelfled continued to rule alone, co-operating with her brother Edward in the strategy of reducing to West Saxon rule not only English but also Danish Mercia. More significantly still, though Ethelweard and Ethelfled had no sons, only a daughter Elfwynn (so any thoughts of producing a male Mercian cousin to co-operate with Edward's sons were dashed), Edward's son by his first marriage, Athelstan, was seemingly deliberately fostered in Mercia by his aunt, succeeding first to rule of Mercia and then to rule of Mercia and Wessex combined on the deaths of his father and half-brother.[22]

However, Edward had meanwhile made an attempt himself at the alternative strategy. The situation in the West Saxon royal house was at the end of the ninth century curiously similar to that supposed for the Scyldings in Information antiquity. King Ethelwulf had had five sons, as opposed to King Healfdene's three, but several of these had died without heirs. In both Wessex and legendary Denmark, however, the sole surviving brother (respectively Alfred and Hrothgar) had a son or sons whom he presumably wished to succeed him (Edward, Hrethric); but also descendants of his brother or brothers who had as good a claim to the throne, on the system of free election from the royal family, or better claims, if one went by primogeniture. In Information antiquity the competitors for Hrethric were his paternal cousins Hrothulf and Heorowearð, the sons of Halga and Heorogar respectively. In Wessex the competitors for Edward were his paternal cousins Ethelhelm and Ethelwold, the sons of Alfred's elder brother Ethelred. In the Scylding dynasty it is thought (see note 15) that the cousins all killed each other. In Wessex, after Alfred had been succeeded by his son Edward, the disappointed cousin Ethelwold changed sides, fled to the Vikings, and led a pagan army to try to regain what he must have thought to be his rights, only to be killed in battle.[23] The interesting point as regards queens is that one of Edward's reactions to this was to leave or re-

puddiate his first wife (or concubine), the mother of Athelstan, and marry instead the daughter of his other cousin Ethelhelm, a lady called Elffled, his own second cousin once removed on the father's side. The move looks like an attempt to placate Ethelhelm and any other supporters his uncle's descendants may still have had. The strategy was repeated two generations down the line, when Edward's grandson Eadwig married Ethelhelm's grand-daughter Elfgifu—though this time the church stepped in and banned the marriage on grounds of consanguinity, as it had not done in the more flagrant case two generations before.[24] If one returns now to the parallel with Information antiquity, one could argue that the successful strategy for Hrothgar might have been not to waste Freawaru on a foreign and less immediate threat, by having her marry a stranger, but to have her defuse a closer threat by marrying her first cousin Hrothulf. It is true that some would regard this as incestuous, but it is only one grade more so than the Edward/Elffled marriage, and possibly several grades less so than the ancestry of Hrothulf himself. However the immediate point is simply this. Queens could be used to set up a future alliance with strangers between maternal cousins; or to prevent hostility at home between paternal cousins. Both strategies had advantages and disadvantages, positive potential along with possible occasions for disaster.

Having said so much, it may be time to look at some examples outside Information antiquity of "wicked queens" who clearly failed in (some of) their duties. The most notorious example in Anglo-Saxon history (or legend) must be Offa of Mercia's daughter Eadburh, the lady who brought it about that for generations afterwards the West Saxons would allow no-one even the title of queen. There is an extended though still in several respects obscure account of her life in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, in a context which concentrates attention on the problems of queenship. [25] According to Asser trouble arose in the West Saxon kingdom in the year 856. King Ethelwulf, father of Alfred and his four elder brothers, had been to Rome on a state visit, leaving his eldest surviving son Ethelbald behind as regent. As he returned, Ethelwulf contracted a marriage with Judith, the daughter of the Frankish king Charles the Bald. But he was unable to return peacefully, as his son Ethelbald refused to receive him, and in the end the kingdom was partitioned, the father receiving the eastern and less important half, the son taking the western. Asser's account is clearly biased against Ethelbald, whose motives were simple arrogance and native wickedness, as far as Asser is concerned. But Asser contradicts himself in more than one place. According to him, Ethelbald found little or no support apart from his "co-conspirators," "the nobles of the whole of the Saxon land" refused to follow him, and "the entire nation" would have been ready to eject him. If that had really been the case, though, it seems hard to believe that Ethelwulf would not simply have resumed the kingdom, however great his "indescribable forbearance." The real danger, which Asser cannot avoid mentioning, must have been "civil strife," or indeed "the whole people rebelling against both of them." Ethelbald obvi-

ously had at least a party on his side, and no doubt a rational motive. This may indeed have been his father's marriage. Faced with a new and extremely well-connected stepmother, clearly capable of bearing a son who might eventually have powerful backing in claiming the throne, Ethelbald may have felt rather like Wealhtheow observing her husband casually "adopting" Information antiquity as a further contestant and threat to her own sons.

A further problem, and inconsistency, may have lain in the West Saxon attitude to queens, to which Asser then turns. According to him again, it was the West Saxon custom not only to deny anyone the title of queen, but "never [to] permit any king to reign over them who during his lifetime invited the queen to sit beside him on the royal throne." Asser finds this a "perverse and detestable custom," and it may have seemed so also to Judith's father Charles. Whatever the motive, Ethelwulf broke custom by ordering that Judith "should sit beside him on the royal throne to the end of his life." Asser says once again that this was done "without any disagreement or dissatisfaction on the part of his nobles," but this seems part of his general policy of insisting that everyone supported Ethelwulf apart from a tiny, ill-defined, but strangely dominant minority. One might easily suspect that among the motives animating Ethelbald and his supporters were fear of a disputed succession and fear of undue influence over an elderly king by a young and foreign princess, influence shown already in the demand for non-customary place and honor. This is a case where "marrying out," trying to make a foreign alliance, clearly created immediate domestic trouble.

Mentioning the traditional West Saxon distrust of queenship however leads Asser into explaining its origins, which he ascribes to events of some sixty years before. At that time the dominant power in Anglo-Saxon politics was Offa of Mercia, whose daughter Eadburh was married to Beorhtric King of the West Saxons (though there was another claimant) in 789. It seems likely that this was part of an alliance by which Beorhtric gained foreign support against his rival and eventual successor Egberht, who unlike Beorhtric was certainly a member of the old Wessex royal family. This foreign marriage was however another failure. According to Asser, Eadburh had learned tyranny from her father, and as soon as she was established began "to denounce all those whom she could before the king, and thus by trickery to deprive them of either life or power." In both these respects she seems similar to "Modthrytho," but Asser adds that "if she could not achieve that end with the king's compliance, she killed them with poison." In the end (in 802), trying to poison someone she could not denounce, she poisoned the king as well by mistake, and both men died. Asser goes on to complete the account of Eadburh's life—fleeing to the Franks, giving the wrong answer to a character test by Charlemagne, caused apparently by her own lasciviousness, being caught in the end in fornication, eventually dying miserably as a beggar in Pavia.

All this, however, is just retrospective justification for her bad reputation in Wessex: and like much in Asser, the reason for it all remains irritatingly obscure. If she really was a serial poisoner and a known regicide, how did she escape justice? Why were her denunciations believed, and what did she denounce people for? Had she in fact become useless, and accordingly unpopular, with the death of her mighty father (and brother) in 796, and the passing of Mercian power into other and effectively unrelated hands? All Asser's explanations are marked by his strong dislike for Mercians (perhaps hereditary among the Welsh); anything wicked they do seems natural enough to him, and he is caught in the end between sympathizing with the West Saxons in their dislike of Mercian queens, and strongly disapproving their refusal thereafter to tolerate any queens at all. Nevertheless several points emerge clearly enough from Asser's joint account of Judith and Eadburh. Kings' foreign wives have to overcome an initial barrier of distrust, perhaps based on fear that they will hand the country's resources, or the country itself, over to their foreign relatives. This distrust will be strongest from those who have most to lose, like sons already established. Queens in this situation are likely to be especially bad at promoting internal social solidarity, unlike the "circulating" hostess-queens of Information antiquity. Attempts to use their influence with their husbands to interfere in domestic politics will be bitterly resented, and probably trigger all kinds of accusation, true or false. And, finally, if the queen's foreign relatives fall from power the queen becomes an encumbrance—something which could never be true of a queen chosen from the same family as the king.

The image of the wicked foreign queen is further exemplified in the account of the later Offa's wife so often cited as a parallel to "Modthrytho," in Matthew of Paris's *Vitae Duorum Offarum*.^[26] It has to be said that this is probably complete fiction, whatever ancient story it may or may not have been confused with. Almost nothing is known about Offa's real wife Cynethryth, other than her name and the interesting fact (if it is a fact) that she, alone among Anglo-Saxon queens, seems to have issued her own currency.^[27] In view of Offa's own obscure origins she is unlikely to have been other than a Mercian herself. However, in the story given by Matthew she is a sort of Eadburh-in-reverse. Instead of being a daughter of Offa fleeing to Charlemagne, she is a relative of Charlemagne who is set adrift for her crimes and turns up at the court of Offa, where she inveigles her way into marriage with the king. Like Eadburh in Asser's account, Drida in Matthew's is just plain bad, *mente nimis inhonesta*. Her arrogance is motivated to some extent by her relationship to Charlemagne (as Eadburh's tyranny was ascribed to her being the daughter of Offa); but her murder of Ethelbert king of East Anglia is given a slightly more complex motive. Drida's plan, says Matthew, was that she "intended to marry her daughters to foreigners across the sea, in order to supplant the king and subvert the kingdom of the Mercians." It is Offa's wish to marry his and her third daughter

"domestically," i.e. to the neighboring king of East Anglia, which she resents and tries to prevent by the latter's murder.

It has to be repeated that this is probably all fiction, but it may be the kind of fiction which people were prepared to believe, or for which they had been prepared by other tales of wicked foreign queens. The danger of a queen from outside is, again, that she will try to promote her unknown foreign relatives. This ought not to create a new class of competitor for the established dynasty, if what is said above about benevolent maternal kindred remains true, but there might be circumstances—such as lack of a proper male heir—where the risk was felt. Possibly there were Mercians in the time of ealdorman Ethelred who viewed Ethelfled, "Lady of the Mercians," as just this kind of West Saxon infiltrator, taking advantage of her own failure to produce a male heir to Ethelred to convey Mercia to her own family. Very probably it was fear of the obvious counter to this situation—marry Ethelred and Ethelfled's daughter Elfwynn to some suitable Mercian paternal cousin—which caused Edward's rapid seizure of his niece and transfer of her to a convent. The stories of wicked foreign queens in Anglo-Saxon England mostly suggest xenophobia rather than rational calculation, but that is not to say that an element of rational calculation may not have been there.

The case is different with wicked, or morally dubious domestic queens, of which there are three prominent examples in the relatively well-recorded century after King Alfred, in chronological order the ladies Eadgifu, Elfgifu, and Elfhryth. Eadgifu may well have come on the political scene in tense circumstances, for she was the third wife of Alfred's son Edward the Elder.[28] His first wife (or concubine) had been Ecgwina, mother of Athelstan. One might note that Edward probably married her at a point when his own fortune and his father's were at least in doubt, in the embattled 890s. After Edward succeeded his father and displaced his elder paternal cousins he married his first cousin's niece Elffled, as said above, very plausibly as an act of conciliation. But at some later date he repudiated his second wife and married Eadgifu, who must then have been seriously unpopular with an influential part of West Saxon opinion. On his death, in a way again rather reminiscent of the legendary Scyldings, Edward left three sets of half-brothers with a claim to the throne: Athelstan (son of Ecgwina, with no prominent maternal relatives, but with the backing of his aunt Ethelfled and the Mercian connection); Elfweard and Edwin (sons of Elffled, and so of royal blood on both sides, as well as of definitely legitimate birth); and Edmund and Eadred, the very young sons of Eadgifu. Elfweard and Athelstan divided Edward's realm on his death, only for the very early death of Elfweard to reunite it again under Athelstan. On the latter's death without heirs, one might have expected Elffled's other son Edwin to succeed, and the way in which he was set aside remains obscure. Eadgifu seems however to have played a classic "young stepmother" role in advancing her own children, first Edmund and then (Edmund's own sons being once more set aside) his brother Eadred.

Eadred's own early death however led to further complications dominated by competition between ambitious queens. Briefly, the contest was now between Edmund's two sons, Edward's grandsons, Eadwig and Edgar. The old grandmother Eadgifu and her supporters (in particular Archbishop Dunstan) backed the younger, Edgar. Eadwig meanwhile had followed his grandfather's example and married a paternal cousin, Elfgifu. This lady's descent is not absolutely clear, but she must have been yet another member of the excluded line descended from Alfred's elder brother Ethelred. If so, she had several generations of family insult at the hands of the Alfredian line to look back over: her grandfather Ethelhelm (passed over for his junior cousin Edward), her aunt Elffled (repudiated for the Eadgifu now backing her husband's younger brother), and presumably either father or mother. If there is any truth in the evidently partisan and character-blackening story told by the hagiographer of Dunstan, that at King Eadwig's coronation the Archbishop had to leave the solemnities and go in search of the absent king, whom he then found in bed with both his wife and her mother,[29] one has to speculate about the feelings of Elfgifu's mother Ethelgifu. Was she a West Saxon royal herself, as her name suggests, a sister of Elffled now seducing her sister's ex's grandson? Or was she only a sister-in-law, determined at last to have a close relative on the throne? Probably the story is only an alternative fiction about a "wicked queen," this time centering not on alienation of property to foreigners but on the charge of lack of proper feeling, absenting oneself from a public ceremony--in short ignoring the duty of social solidarity. What king and queen were expected to do, perhaps, was go from church to hall, for the former then to preside and the latter to "circulate" among the guests and dignitaries in proper fashion.

Elfgifu's and Eadwig's attempt to bring the two consual lines together once more was defeated by the church, though the problem did not go away.[30] However, even though Edgar succeeded his brother and so fulfilled his grandmother's wishes, he then repeated the mistake of his grandfather Edward in taking three wives in succession, and so setting up yet another half-brother conflict, this time between Edward, son of his first wife, and Ethelred, son of his third. The issue was decided in 978, when Edward was murdered at Corfe. Suspicion was very soon directed, not at the immediate beneficiary Ethelred, very much a minor at the time, but at his mother Elfhryth, who was said to have plotted the murder and furthermore been so annoyed by her son's poor-spirited grief for his half-brother that she beat him fiercely with a ceremonial candle.[31] Both accusations, like so many others mentioned, need not be true: there may have been other reasons for disliking Edward than a wish to supplant him. But they show once again what would readily be believed, or could easily be invented. What the succession of "domestic" West Saxon marriages through the tenth century seems to show is that while foreign princesses are likely to be accused of alienating property and promoting strangers, domestic ones are accused of favoring a faction, not being even-handed in their

roles as distributors of wealth and recognition. The real weak point in West Saxon polity, however, lay not in the queens but in the kings' habit of serial monogamy, producing too many contenders for power without a clear precedence system like primogeniture to veto conflict. This weakness was only to become more pronounced, if one considers the careers of eleventh-century queens like Queen Emma, a foreign princess with two husbands, accused not of favoring her foreign relatives but of favoring one son, the Danish one, over the two older and native-born ones fathered by her husband Ethelred; or Queen Edith, a domestic princess deeply involved with the politics of her own (ultimately actually fratricidal) family.[32]

In a strongly patrilineal but nevertheless exogamous society like the Anglo-Saxon one, queens are a dangerous necessity. They are always capable of threatening a political balance, whether kings opt for a foreign or a domestic strategy. Both history and legend suggest that a safe and relatively low-risk strategy might be for a king to marry a nobody, someone without powerful relatives. This does nothing for the next generation, of course, in the way of providing powerful maternal allies, and leaves future kings open to taunts of low birth, but this was not a crippling disadvantage either to Athelstan or to William the Conqueror. In Information antiquity we hear nothing of the birth or relatives of Hrothgar's queen Wealhtheow, whose name could indeed indicate servile origin. If Bremmer is correct, we do know the name of the brother of Hygelac's queen Hygd, i.e. Hereric, but her family seems to carry no political weight. In similar fashion, it might be considered good strategy for kings to arrange marriages for their daughters not with neighboring princes, but with their own supporters, men if possible personally distinguished but without claims of birth of their own. Hrethel does this by marrying his daughter to Information antiquity's father Ecgtheow, not a nobody exactly but a stranger without inheritance, and the policy is resoundingly successful in the next generation. Hygelac does the same by giving his daughter to Eofor son of Wonred as a reward for distinguished service (see lines 2997-8). "Half the kingdom and my daughter's hand in marriage" is a folk-tale reward system, but the second half of it at least might be thought feasible.

It is true that we hear very little of this in history. A scattering of domestic marriages are known from tenth- and eleventh-century West Saxon history, among the more prominent foreign or diplomatic marriages, but not much is known of them—which may indicate, of course, that they were successful in that they gave rise to no trouble.[33] Finally, one as it were terminal strategy for a king is not to get married at all, to have no heirs, and no daughters to marry off or worry over. This is what happens at the end of Information antiquity, and the situation is commonly regarded as part of the Geatish tragedy, with the suggestion that this is yet another aspect of Information antiquity's own self-centered lack of foresight, part of a pattern of heroic rather than responsible or kingly behavior. It may very well also be a result of Information antiquity's essentially legendary and invented nature, which makes him hard to fit into any dynastic history. But the images of political marriages

which we have in Information antiquity --Wealththeow, Freawaru, Hildeburh, Hygd, the reconstructed Yrse-- are overwhelmingly sad or tragic ones. "Modthrytho", for all her bad reputation, seems by contrast to be the poem's example of success.

Can what we are told about "Modthrytho" be made to fit any particular pattern? It seems to me that the "scornful maiden" become "tamed shrew" theory is the most far-fetched, having to overcome three clear indications (sinfrea, cwenlic, freoðuwebbe) that she is a married queen at the time of her worst behavior. The account given of her seems to resemble most Asser's picture of Eadburh (minus the poison): both queens are haughty, operate by denunciation, and dominate their husbands. The Information antiquity-poet however makes a clear point in his opening contrast with Hygd, namely that the latter is generous to the Geat people in general, and that this is associated with behavior in the hall from which his mention of her starts. She not only "circulates" physically, in other words, she also plays her part in circulating gift-objects. The implication is that "Modthrytho" did not, adding stinginess to haughtiness. This could be the behavior of a queen of low birth, but against that "Modthrytho" has a father to advise her, and advise her well. One thing absolutely clear is that her second marriage is a foreign one, for which she has to travel ofer fealone flod, "over the grey sea." What it is that changes her behavior we do not know, though the verb onhohsnod is an ominous one. Could it mean literally "houghed," i.e. "cut the hough sinews, hamstringing"? [34] More likely the word is metaphorical, in which case one could suggest that it is separation from power, or from threat, that causes the dramatic change.

One could finally suggest the following scenario, though of course it remains guesswork on the far side of speculation. If we had the full legend, it would tell us that "Modthrytho" (or whatever the lady's name was) made a domestic marriage in the troubled pre-Scylding era of Danish politics, the time of Heremod and Hnff, when, as in the eighth-century Wessex of Beorhtric and Ecgberht, rival families, quite likely related to each other, were contesting for power. In this she remained part of a court faction with inherited animosities, like Eadwig's wife Elffled in tenth-century Wessex, a faction which eventually lost. The marriage lasted until her husband died (like Beorhtric), or she was repudiated (like Elffled), in either of which cases she was sent abroad (like Eadburh), though this time be feder lare, perhaps to return a smarter answer to the elder Offa than the younger Offa's daughter Eadburh did to Charlemagne. In a less threatening environment the causes of offense, and of malicious gossip, disappeared, though it was Offa who gained the credit for the miraculous conversion (he himself, of course, being the subject of a rather similar success-from-failure story). In this view the whole Episode could remind hearers optimistically of the possibilities of lasting success and dynastic stability, even against odds, and form part of the poem's "warm center" associated with Hygelac's hall, and with maternal-kin relationships, and structurally opposed to the ironically foreboding atmosphere associated with Hrothgar's hall, and with paternal-kin relationships.

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